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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 003696

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR JEANNETTE E. DAVIS, DRL/PHD
PASS TO DHS FOR WESLEY WILLIAMS,

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM KDEM PREL KPAO CA IZ JO

SUBJECT: DEMOCRACY IN ACTION -- PURPLE FINGERS ACROSS CANADA

11. (U) Summary. In contrast to sealed borders and security curfews in Iraq to protect Iraqi voters, Iraqis resident in Canada overcame only bitter temperatures in their efforts to make their political will known on December 13, 14 and 15. Approximately 8,700 of the 15,000 to 20,000 eligible voters headed to voting stations in Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary and Montreal. The unofficial estimate of Iraqis living in Canada is 25,000 to 40,000. While this number represents a slight decrease from the 10,000 who voted in the January interim parliamentary elections, it includes at least one busload of voters from upstate New York. Ahmed Al-Hayderi, Media Director and Accreditation Officer for the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI) and a dual Canadian-Iraqi citizen who has lived in Canada for 25 years, attributes the decrease to a brief two-week organization period, a media campaign that began late as well as mid-week, rather than weekend, voting. He highlighted the presence of new voters, whose participation was facilitated by the same-day registration and voting system implemented for this election. Showing off his inked purple index finger, he called it a "badge in defiance of terrorism" and stated that "democracy in Iraq is a process and it is now irreversible." End summary.

More Efficient Process is More Inclusive

12. (U) In Ottawa, the single polling station in a strip mall in the southern part of the city attracted a variety of secular and religiously observant Iraqis -- Sunni, Shia and Kurd. Poloff, who visited the storefront polling station on 14 December, witnessed democracy in action, as volunteers eagerly facilitated voters' registration and balloting. Security was evident but not intrusive; a Royal Mounted Canadian Police (RCMP) Officer was posted at the external door. Thomas P. Haney, Program Director of the Police Leadership Program in charge of site security, said that cooperation with the RCMP and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) had resulted in few, if any, security risks. Voters passed through airport-like security measures prior to entering what appeared to be a converted office that housed four registration and balloting stations manned by male and female volunteers, some wearing kafiya turbans, others bare-headed, some in hijab and others bundled in Western winter clothing. Several official election observers from the International Mission for Iraqi Elections monitored the process along with several "agents" from several of the political parties and movements running in the election. There were no visible signs of active campaigning or any posters or information leaflets on the site.

13. (U) According to Al-Hayderi, simultaneous registration and voting (contrasted with January's two-part process) brought new voters out for this election, as did the recent passage of the more inclusive Iraqi Constitution and the addition from January of a Montreal voting station. He said that Saddam's trial, while long anticipated and welcomed, was not a factor in the increased turnout. Polls opened at 9:00 a.m. and remained open until 9:00 p.m. but the heaviest turnout was in the mid-morning and late afternoon/evening.

14. (U) After presenting photo identification, a voter registered his/her name and received a four-page printed Arabic-language ballot with over 300 movements and parties (and their associated symbols) listed for the 275 Parliamentary seats. The voter took the ballot to a table and, behind a cardboard screen, marked one box for the desired party. Once the balloting was completed, the voter separated the three unmarked sheets and placed them in a basket, dipped his/her right index finger in special long-lasting purple ink and deposited the folded page with his/her choice into a plastic bin secured with special ties. Ballot boxes were stored in a secure location and official election observers began counting the ballots on 15 December. Final results will be transmitted to the IECI as soon as they are available and the ballot forms will be packaged and hand-carried to Amman next week.

The View from Mississauga

15. (U) ConGen Toronto reported that the Greater Toronto Area polling station in a suburban Mississauga office park was busy with registrants and voters. Manager Anwar Hamasoor told Toronto poloff that his polling site had accommodated several families from the Buffalo, NY area who had crossed the border to cast their ballots. He added that this election's streamlined one-day registration and voting system had encouraged participation from the border areas of the U.S. A woman who supervised the translators assigned to each of the 15 voting tables said that the Toronto voters included many ethnic Assyrians, and that many of them had told her that, while still optimistic about the current election, their overall enthusiasm was beginning to wane because of the prolonged strife in Iraq. Five monitors from the International Mission for Iraqi Elections, under the auspices of Elections Canada, were well positioned to view registration and balloting. They reported no incidents or irregularities as of mid-day December 14.

The U.S. Must Stay -- For Now

16. (U) An interview with a thirty-something female voter, a dual citizen who had lived in Canada for ten years and who had previously voted in the January election, revealed her pride in participating in her country's unique democratic transition. She identified security as the most pressing issue facing Iraq but, while acknowledging that Iraqis are better prepared to handle their own security concerns, she stressed that now was not the time for the Americans to leave. Al-Hayderi, who had participated in the USG-sponsored Future of Iraq Working Group on Infrastructure and Economy, expressed his disappointment that the Department of State's initiative had lost out to bureaucratic infighting with the Department of Defense, the result of which was the side-lining of recommendations that might have created a more stable environment in post-Saddam Iraq.

The Diaspora Engaged

17. (U) Both Al-Hayderi and the anonymous voter acknowledged that many Iraqis currently living in the Diaspora would and are considering a return to a peaceful and stable Iraq. While Al-Hayderi admitted to being set in his ways and not having any plans to return permanently to Iraq, he cited that a friend who had not lived in Iraq for 15 years had returned two years ago with his family to open a holding company in the communications field. Al-Hayderi estimated that he employs hundreds of people. The anonymous voter said that, while she values her Canadian citizenship and plans to vote in the January 2006 Canadian elections, she and her family (half-Iraqi husband and two young children) would consider returning permanently to Iraq when the security situation improves.

18. (U) Comment: While Canada actively recruits immigrants to fill labor gaps and augment a shrinking and aging population, it is less successful at utilizing the skills that many immigrants bring to the country. J.P. Melville, Director of Cross-Cultural Training and Community Development at the Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization (OCISO) confirmed that, like many immigrants, those from Iraq have difficulty getting their professional credentials recognized and finding suitable professional employment in Canada. He added that, while many more recent immigrants talk about returning to their home countries, by and large they remain in Canada because of the potential for their children. End Comment.

19. (U) ConGen Toronto contributed to this cable.

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WILKINS